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## New Youth Agency Taking Shape as Two Close

by [Brandi Grissom](#) | 4 hours ago

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The Texas Youth Commission and the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission are officially gone, and in their place, a new agency is taking shape — lawmakers and advocates hope — to more efficiently and effectively deal with young offenders.

The new Texas Juvenile Justice Department's oversight board met for the first time last week, appointing an advisory panel to take recommendations as it merges the agency's two predecessors. They expect to hire a new agency leader as soon as next month.

Lawmakers created the new department this year following massive overhauls to the Texas Youth Commission that sprang from a 2007 abuse scandal. Their mission, they said, was to save the state money by streamlining operations and to continue the reforms that started five years ago.

As the board takes on the hefty task of folding the two agencies into one, advocates and lawmakers are watching closely to see that the mission is accomplished.

“The merger will allow budget savings, and we’ll get more bang for our dollar,” said state Sen. [John Whitmire](#), D-Houston, chairman of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee.

Whitmire and juvenile justice advocates agree that the new agency’s top priority should be keeping youths out of high-security lockup facilities in remote areas of the state. When news broke of the sexual and physical abuse problems at TYC in 2007, about 5,000 youths were in facilities mostly located in far-flung rural Texas towns.

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Now, though, there are only about 1,200 youths in TYC facilities, Whitmire said. The incarcerated youth population plummeted after lawmakers adopted reforms allowing only youths charged with felony offenses to go to lockups, preventing offenders older than 19 from going to youth facilities, and encouraging counties to keep youths closer to home for treatment.

Whitmire said he expects that declining population trend to continue and the new agency to ensure that youths remain in their communities for treatment and rehabilitation. Most youths who wind up in the criminal justice system, he said, come from large urban areas where services for mental health and substance abuse issues are readily available. It makes

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little sense, Whitmire said, to send youths, particularly minorities, to facilities in rural areas where there are few resources to help them and few role models for them to follow. Offenders are more successful, he said, when they stay in the communities where they are from and where they will live after their punishment.

“We’ve just got to have a better youth released than the one that came into the criminal justice system,” he said.

The TYC budget, though, has not downsized as much as its population. And lawmakers said during the legislative session that they expected the merger to save as much as \$150 million over two years.

Jeanette Moll, juvenile justice policy analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said the new department faces myriad expectations to improve treatment for wayward youths. But one of the most achievable goals, she said, is reducing spending.

“The most important thing coming out this is going to be a more streamlined and efficient agency,” Moll said.

She also praised staff of the TYC and the probation commission for ensuring that the transition to the new department is as seamless as possible.

Initially, at least, the merger will have little effect on the youth in facilities, said Jim Hurley, a spokesman for the Juvenile Justice Department. An incident last week in which about 50 youths ran out of their classrooms on the campus in Giddings and another half-dozen smashed in windows and broke down a door, he said, was not related to the transition.

“My understanding is the kids just saw an opportunity, and they took off running,” Hurley said. “From time to time, something like that might happen.”

The largest changes, Hurley said, will occur at the administrative offices in Austin, where the two agencies’ headquarters will be combined under a new executive director. The board posted the job last week and expects to hire the agency’s leader early next month.

Ana Yáñez Correa, executive director of the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, sent a letter to the new juvenile justice board outlining qualities they should seek in a new leader. Yáñez Correa said it is crucial for a new leader to understand not only the importance of keeping youths in their communities but also that services in those communities — both secure facilities and treatment centers — must be adequately funded.

“These kids are ultimately going to transition from the juvenile justice system to the adult system if they are not helped,” she said.

Like Moll and Whitmire, Yáñez Correa said she was optimistic the new department would not only reduce costs but also improve outcomes for youths who run afoul of the law. But only time will tell, they said.

“It’s not rocket-science stuff,” Whitmire said. “You break this cycle of criminal activity and violating the law and creating a disturbance, and we’ll all benefit from a safer society and save money, too.”

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